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# Mexico's Evolving Security Posture

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*We are declaring a war without quarter against the drug traffickers and the pernicious criminal Mafias.*

President Vicente Fox

**M**exico's presidential election in July 2000 constituted one of the country's most important political developments since the Mexican Revolution early in the 20th century. Voters' selection of President Vicente Fox ended more than seven decades of Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) control and brought in an energetic, forward-thinking head of state to run a country facing a host of challenges and opportunities. Among the many dimensions of Fox's victory was the potential for profound change in Mexico's military and law enforcement establishments as new leaders formulated programs to deal with enduring and evolving security problems.

These problems are not Mexico's alone but the joint concern of the United States and other nations in the region. Mexico's new administration and security institutions face daunting challenges:

- Mexico's central role as a drug-transiting route and home to powerful trafficking cartels.
- Festering insurgencies in several Mexican states.
- Continued immigration flows and alien smuggling northward.
- Endemic corruption in key institutions.
- Other transnational or public-safety threats ranging from international arms trafficking to violent street crime.

In January 2001 Fox inaugurated a program that had implications for all of Mexico's security agencies and forces. On 25 January 2001 Fox announced the new "National Crusade Against Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime" in Sinaloa, a prominent center of drug trafficking and

violence. During the announcement, his new military, law enforcement and prosecutorial agency heads accompanied him.<sup>1</sup>

As the Fox government formulates its policies, the extent and nature of US-Mexican cooperation will be an important component. The issues noted above affect US interests in various ways, particularly along the 2,000 miles of shared border, and Fox has been a strong advocate of closer ties with the United States. Past cooperative efforts—particularly in the military-to-military sphere—have ranged from distant to promising. The past several years, in particular, have been characterized by advances such as the growing rapport among top officers on both sides of the border and cooperation in the counterdrug arena. There have also been setbacks fostered by uneven US security-assistance programs, perceived meddling in Mexico's internal affairs and Mexico's lingering suspicions about US intentions.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, military cooperation on serious transnational security issues has improved in many ways.

The new administration's main effort in dealing with Mexico's security problems has focused on initial changes to military and security policies, especially military and law enforcement employment and current threats. In particular, over the past half decade many Mexican internal commentators—including many of Fox's National Action Party associates—voiced strong opposition to militarizing Mexico's law enforcement and its military presence in every dimension of public safety and internal security. The Fox administration aims to reduce military presence in many of these areas. The evolving role of Mexico's armed forces bears an especially close look in the early post-PRI era.

## **Army and Defense Establishment Under President Fox**

Mexico's armed forces consist of the Defense Secretariat (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional* or Sedena, comprising the army and air force) and the Marine Secretariat (*Secretaría de la Marina*—the navy and amphibious elements). From 1994 to December 2000 when Fox took office, the Secretary of Defense was General Enrique Cervantes Aguirre. His tenure and legacy continue to influence the nearly 200,000-man military institution that he directed. His legacy is replete with positive accomplishments. He created additional housing for enlisted personnel, facilitated badly needed pay raises and worked hard on professionalizing his forces overall. Cervantes helped foster interaction and cooperation with the United States to a greater extent than had been present in the past.



**General Cervantes with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Henry H. Shelton.** Cervantes helped foster precedented interaction and cooperation with the United States.

Mexican security specialist Jorge Luis Sierra points out that Cervantes employed 25,000 mobilized personnel throughout the military regions in the counterdrug struggle—more than previous secretaries of defense. The new kinds of units Cervantes created are also impressive, and include airborne special forces groups and the army's new amphibious special forces groups for riverine operations. He also prosecuted corrupt officers—including very senior ones.<sup>3</sup> This campaign included arresting Generals Mario Arturo Acosta Chaparro and Francisco Humberto Quiros Hermosillo on 31 August 2000 during the waning days of his tenure.

The arrest of these two officers was an event of some note, given their prominence in the Army. Since 1998 the press has publicized the two generals' long-standing ties to drug traffickers, specifically to the Juarez cartel. These relationships may have gone back many years, according to Mexican reports.<sup>4</sup> Both generals had been associated with the counterinsurgency campaigns against guerrillas in the state of Guerrero in the 1970s and had held a number of important posts since then.<sup>5</sup> Acosta, in particular, had become well known as a counter-insurgency specialist with the revelation and partial publication of a Defense Secretariat study on Mex-ico's continuing insurgency dangers. He and Quiros had reportedly both been associated with the formation and activities of "White Brigade" paramilitary forces that conducted anti-insurgency operations during this period.<sup>6</sup>

It appears that the military is making serious efforts to reduce corruption throughout the ranks, which with military professionalization, may promise continued reforms and effectiveness. However, critics point to many other senior officers of the Defense Secretariat, including Cervantes, who have been accused of corruption and complicity with top Mexican narcotraffickers. These allegations will continue to form a backdrop for assessing Mexico's military development.<sup>7</sup>

Fox's choice to head the Defense Secretariat was General Clemente Vega Garcia.<sup>8</sup> The choice was welcomed from most quarters, with Mexico's National Security Adviser, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, underscoring the official view that Vega was "without a doubt the best choice."<sup>9</sup> Vega commanded Military Region I, which includes the Mexican capital, federal district and Morelos state. He is regarded as having a strong academic background and intellectual bent, with a good grasp of national security issues. In particular, Vega is viewed as an excellent choice to facilitate interaction and exchanges between Mexico's military and civilian sectors, a substantial shortfall in the past, given the guarded, closed nature of Mexico's military institution. Fox clearly intends to seek and consider military views on key security decisions and develop a joint approach to problems. Close interaction and cooperation among the military, Attorney General's Office (PGR), and new Secretariat for Public Security and its police units will be critical.

Despite his earlier views, Fox intends for the Defense Secretariat to continue its major counter-drug role. However desirable it may be to turn the role over entirely to law enforcement, Fox, like his predecessor, has determined that only the military possesses the manpower, equipment and relative institutional integrity to carry out these operations. Fox made this explicit in August 2000—news welcomed by US officials, including then director of the Office of National Drug Control Strategy Barry MacCaffrey.<sup>10</sup> Most Mexican specialists agree that this decision does not constitute abandoning the plan to withdraw the military (as many as 34,000 personnel) from these roles but a desire to further develop the police forces needed to perform the tasks adequately.<sup>11</sup>

The much smaller Maritime Secretariat directs the Mexican navy and is headed by Fox appointee Vice Admiral Marco Antonio Peyrot Gonzalez. Like other Fox choices, he expresses a measure of flexibility over the roles that might be asked of him. Peyrot spoke about possible participation in UN peacekeeping operations, a role quickly rejected by past administrations and senior armed forces leaders. The admiral said the navy would do whatever the president or congress ordered, even if it required additional equipment or preparation. He rejected the idea that Mexico might ever accept UN troops on its territory and indicated that the navy was acquiring ships and developing tactics needed to continue counterdrug operations.<sup>12</sup>

As the new year began, the continued joint antidrug and crime role of the military and the police was evident in the Fox administration statistics. An announcement on 7 January by the PGR and Defense Secretariat—specifically the Defense General Staff's Section 10 (S-10) responsible for military counterdrug operations—revealed that in the first 38 days "joint operations of both agencies have led to the seizure of 3.4 metric tons of cocaine, 133 metric tons of marijuana, 69 kilos of opium gum, and 5.4 kilos of heroin, and the arrest of 624 people suspected of crimes against health."<sup>13</sup> S-10 chief General Roberto Garcia Vergara indicated further that the military's goal was to destroy 3.3 thousand hectares of marijuana and 2.2 hectares of opium poppies within the first 100 days, thus preventing substantial quantities of marijuana and heroin from reaching drug markets.<sup>14</sup> The institutional military has the explicit mandate to continue its role in this important dimension of Mexican national—and international—security.

## **Changes in Law Enforcement**

Fox's frequently stated intentions to reduce the militarization of the nation's law enforcement meant not only withdrawing institutional armed forces from policing duties but also removing thousands of officers and men from temporary assignment to law enforcement duties, especially with federal and state police forces. Even before taking office, however, he determined that this, too, was not a prospect for early execution. Difficulties meeting Mexico's public safety and overlapping national security requirements greatly exceeded capabilities of corrupt and inefficient law enforcement agencies. Instead, Fox has embarked on a gradual approach in which the Mexican military continues to play major law enforcement roles while police forces are professionalized. The previous administration had articulated a similar approach, but the new president is moving with more vigor and focus.



**The PFP—now in the process of professionalizing its components—is a visible presence in many parts of Mexico.**

Underscoring Fox's reliance on key officers, one of his first and most controversial moves was to name an army brigadier general as PGR. Brigadier General Macedo de la Concha had previously been the chief military prosecutor, and his appointment constitutes the first time in the Republic's history that a serving officer has been named as the nation's chief law enforcement officer. Opposition to the appointment came from human rights groups and others who based their opposition on the army's alleged legal and human rights violations and the fear that this posting accelerated—not reduced—militarization.<sup>15</sup>

According to Mexican reports, substantial reorganizations are expected under the PGR. Three especially prominent organizations may be marked for early abolishment—the Federal Judicial Police (PJF), whose members have frequently been found guilty of crimes themselves; the Special Unit for Combating Organized Crime, also noted for corruption; and the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Dealing With Crimes Against Health, a direct successor to the organization once headed by drug-trafficking army General Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo. Mexican authorities have judged all three organizations to be so corrupt and inefficient that they need total restructuring. Reports indicate that their vetted remnants will be incorporated into a new PGR ministerial police. Whatever the final form, much emphasis is being put on a newly structured organization and additional police forces outside the PGR.

Alejandro Gertz Manero heads this new organization—the Secretariat of Public Safety and Services to Justice (SSP).<sup>16</sup> Gertz Manero had served earlier as Mexico City's chief law

enforcement officer, but the new position gives him nationwide responsibilities and control of powerful police units. Specifically, the SSP must undertake an intense, decisive assault on drug trafficking and organized crime.<sup>17</sup> To do this, Gertz Manero has received control of the Federal Preventative Police (PFP) that former President Ernesto Zedillo provisionally created. The PFP is now formalized under new legislation and characterized by some as the "super police" because of its sweeping mission and planned development.<sup>18</sup> Fox had actually discussed dissolving or relocating this organization before the election but subsequently changed his mind. The PFP is to expand rapidly and target major drug-trafficking and organized crime areas along the US-Mexican border and other areas of Mexico. It will work closely with the PGR, the military, and other security and law enforcement organizations.



**Members of the ERP receiving basic weapons training.**

In the area of policy, the SSP is charged with developing public safety policies on federal crimes; coordinating consistent crime policy among federal agencies; proposing actions and strategies for crime prevention; incorporating public participation in crime prevention programs and engaging in other actions. One of the most demanding tasks will be the SSP's duty "to organize, direct, administer and supervise the PFP, as well as to guarantee

the honest performance of their personnel and to apply their disciplinary system."<sup>19</sup> To oversee that process, SSP Secretary Gertz Manero appointed Francisco Arellano Noblecia as PFP commissioner general.

There are a number of security issues of common importance to the United States and Mexico. In the early days of the administration, the Fox regime appears to be moving in promising directions on immigration, crime, human rights, US-Mexico military cooperation and engagement. Two early developments deserve continued attention as Mexico's government deals with a shifting security environment: Mexico's changed attitude toward insurgencies centered largely to the south and a new development in international drug traffic.

## **Insurgency**

The most well-known of Mexico's guerrilla problems is centered in the southern state of Chiapas, where on 1 January 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) surprised Mexico's government and the world by temporarily taking over several Chiapas towns and raising the specter of a broadly based and effective insurgency. Negotiations stalled, leaving an uneasy standoff in Chiapas between the Zapatistas and the army, police and government. Occasional violence, particularly among EZLN supporters and local paramilitaries, shows that the situation is unresolved and still threatens to become more acute.



**Under President Fox, the army has withdrawn from a number of areas it had occupied after the surprise emergence of the EZLN in 1994.**

The Fox administration has insisted that the EZLN constitutes no threat to Mexico's national security. As the president's national security adviser put it, "On the contrary, it is the Zapatistas and their supporters who have been threatened, who have lost the most people since 1994. It is their communities that have been in danger. . . . War was not declared against us but against a regime that is now over and done with. We have come to make peace, and we are not going to operate with the same standards as the former administration against whom the EZLN declared war."<sup>20</sup>

Since taking office, Fox and his top spokesmen have emphasized that Chiapas is not a military or national security problem but a problem arising from poverty and marginalized people, particularly the indigenous population upon which the EZLN is so heavily based. As a consequence, the Fox administration believes that the measures needed are primarily social and economic rather than military—follow-ups to the unratified San Andres Larrainzar peace accords that have formed a backdrop to the settlement. Fox has ordered the army, which has had a heavy presence in Chiapas, to close down some military camps and provide more uncontrolled space. He has also initiated programs to bring more jobs to the area and raise living standards. Congress will take the next step to revisit provisions of the San Andres Larrainzar accords and other associated issues.

But Chiapas is not Mexico's only insurgency. In Guerrero, Oaxaca and other states, far more dangerous groups have been operating for several decades, despite army successes in killing or capturing key leaders and destroying larger bands. Their resurgence since the mid-1990s has been remarkable, and attacks, including multistate armed actions, against army and police units have resulted in government casualties, intensified army and police counter-insurgency efforts, and a greatly increased military presence in affected areas. In particular, the People's Revolutionary Army (EPR); the Revolutionary Army of Insurgent Peoples (ERPI); the People's Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARP); the Villist Revolutionary Army of the People; and the Clandestine Revolutionary Army of the Poor have been visible over the past year or so and, in some cases, have common origins or other mutual affiliations.<sup>21</sup> Fears that one or more of these

armed groups would interfere with the July presidential elections were never realized, however, despite early indications to the contrary.

Fox has sought to deal with these groups peacefully, despite their assertions that his July 2000 victory meant nothing. He announced an amnesty for the EPR shortly after taking office and at least limited demilitarization in an area of Oaxaca. Through his interior minister Fox said that "The new government is open to dialogue with all the armed organizations. The important thing now is to seal dialogue and to carry out action that will make it possible to solve the problems in the southern part of the country."<sup>22</sup>

At least one armed group had a more or less neutral response. The FARP's "Major Vinicio" indicated a willingness to talk but also indicated that the government would have to meet certain unstated conditions. Shortly after the Fox election, the ERPI indicated its intention not to renounce armed struggle, and its reaction to subsequent events, including offers of dialogue or amnesty, is unknown.<sup>23</sup> How the Fox regime deals with the southern states and fulfills development promises will shape any guerrilla-government dialogue. The groups and populace of the regions themselves have heard a host of government promises that were never realized.

## **Drug Trafficking and Insurgency**

US government statistics identify Mexico as the source of about one-half of the cocaine coming into the United States, and Mexico stands as the second largest supplier of heroin. Other drugs, such as methamphetamines and marijuana, are dispatched over distribution routes that now extend across the United States. Allegations of insurgent involvement in Mexico's profitable drug trade had been limited and far from conclusive. That changed in fall 2000 but not as a consequence of Mexico's guerrilla activity. Rather, the Colombian guerilla conflict and its clear intersection with international drug trafficking have spilled into Mexico.

Regional spillover from this conflict has long concerned states in the region, particularly Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil, that directly border Colombia. Most recently, the largest Colombian insurgent group—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—has directly involved itself with one of the largest Mexican drug-trafficking organizations, the Tijuana cartel or Arellano-Felix Organization (AFO), as it is also called. The AFO is based in Tijuana, Mexico, across the border from San Diego, California. The Drug Enforcement Administration describes it as "one of the most powerful, violent, and aggressive trafficking groups in the world."<sup>24</sup> The AFO has been extraordinarily successful at bribing and infiltrating law enforcement organizations and is reputed to be advanced in acquiring and applying new technologies. It is a multicommodity-trafficking organization, handling all major drugs. One of the family's four brothers—the extremely violent Ramon Eduardo Arellano-Felix—is on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List, sharing a place opposite terrorist Usama bin Ladin.



**The AFO's Ramon Eduardo Arellano-Felix is extremely violent and shares a place opposite terrorist Osama bin Laden on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List. (Right) A year-long wiretap investigation led to the arrest of Jorge Castro, a high-ranking member of the AFO, and three others in 1998. Federal agents also seized nearly four tons of cocaine and \$15 million in cash.**

In fall 2000 Mexican law enforcement officials discovered that this violent drug-trafficking group and one of Colombia's largest and most successful insurgent organizations had joined together in a drug, arms and money venture. Mexican law enforcement agencies reported that the FARC proposed to send cocaine to the AFO in return for arms and money as early as December 1999, and the undertaking apparently began in 2000.<sup>25</sup> Mexican authorities have made arrests and substantially detailed the developing FARC-AFO trafficking arrangements. For its part, the FARC adamantly denies the charges and asserts that it has never been involved in trafficking activities. Evidence cited by Mexican authorities, however, is far more compelling, and the PGR hopes that the arrests made during this operation have disrupted the FARC-Mexican trafficker ties for at least the present.

Meanwhile, Fox has targeted the AFO for destruction, one of the most serious efforts Mexico's government has made against a major drug cartel. After announcing FARC complicity in Mexican drug trafficking in December 2000, the government announced its intent to flood the violent AFO headquarters in Tijuana with 2,000 PFP officers, along with state and metropolitan police and army units. As Fox himself announced, "We are going to concentrate everything in this place for a long period of time and I am sure that within six months we will be able to clean Tijuana up and restore peace. This truly is an in-depth job that needs to be done. . . . There is no doubt at all that we are going to be able to destroy their power."<sup>26</sup>

Fox's announcement also came as a dozen people were executed in Tijuana in just a few hours. Tijuana was the first of several targeted areas, including subsequently Mexicali in Baja California opposite Calexico, California; Ciudad Juarez opposite El Paso, Texas; and Sinaloa State, notorious for its drugs and violent crime. Fox endorsed attention to these areas in his January National Crusade Against Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime, which called upon the PFP, state and local police, and the army to attack, in order of priority, drug trafficking, rampant kidnapping and organized automobile theft.<sup>27</sup> Even as the initial operations of the crusade were unfolding, Fox and other officials emphasized the need to add more trained police. The results of these efforts will signal the future direction and effectiveness of Mexico's new joint military and

law enforcement operations against growing public safety, national security and trans-national threats.

Electing Vicente Fox was a benchmark in Mexico's modern history, with profound implications for the United States and regional security. Fox and his military and law enforcement teams appear to be addressing Mexican and US security problems with energy and realism, recognizing that approaches might have to change, even fundamentally, to be effective. In particular, during the initial phases of his administration, Fox seems to be advancing US-Mexican security cooperation while insisting on essentially Mexican approaches and solutions. Attacks on drug trafficking and crime are particularly welcome north of the border, although Mexican and US observers note that many other programs and crusades have failed in the past.

Fox seems interested in applying military experience to support civil authorities in disaster response, complex military and law enforcement interaction, and regional peacekeeping. He is also attacking endemic corruption—the "hole in the bottom of the bucket" that could make all other reforms and initiatives fruitless. There will certainly be disagreements and problems between the United States and Mexico in such areas as immigration and human rights compliance, but for the present, the new age in Mexican politics offers far more encouragement to bilateral and regional progress against common problems.

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1. "Fox: será 'amarga' la guerra antinarco," *La Jornada*, 25 January 2001. The program is designated "Cruzada Nacional contra el Narcotráfico y el Crimen Organizado" (National Crusade Against Narcotrafficking and Organized Crime) and has goals similar to former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo's program.
2. High-level exchanges, such as those involving former Army Chief of Staff General Gordon R. Sullivan, former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former Mexican Secretary of National Defense General Enrique Cervantes, were important benchmarks, as have been the annual US-Mexican Border Commanders' Conferences. On the other hand, one of the most publicized US military-assistance efforts was plagued by problems from the onset. This undertaking involved the 1996 US decision to send 73 Vietnam-era UH-1 helicopters to Mexico for counterdrug operations. While public statements on both sides of the border lauded the effort, Mexican generals privately expressed disdain for the old equipment. US congressional allegations about the use of the aircraft in counterinsurgency operations also irritated Mexican officers. The eventual transfer of the refurbished aircraft in 1997 presented the Mexican military with continuing maintenance problems and limited helicopter usefulness. In early October 1999, despite US efforts to resolve the problems, all but one of the helicopters (which had crashed) were returned unceremoniously to the United States by truck.
3. Sierra, "La cúpula militar, infectada por narcotráfico y corrupción," *Proceso*, 10 September 2000, 10.
4. "Generals' Property Unsearched, Unattached," *Reforma*, 15 September 2000, as translated in FBIS LAP 20000915000056.

5. "El narcoestado, desafío para Fox," *Proceso*, 3 December 2000 (translation from the French book, *The Lost Battle Against Drugs*), received via Internet.
6. Both officers had played a role in recovering ransom money from Mexico's most famous historic guerrilla of the 1960s and 1970s, Lucio Cabanas, who had kidnapped the notoriously repressive Guerrero State Governor Figueroa Figueroa and demanded payment for his release. One account has it that "Acosta Chaparro dressed up as a woman for this mission." See Tomas Tenorio Galindo, "Military Intelligence Document: An Old View of the Guerrillas," *Reforma*, 16 July 1996, as translated in FBISLAT96188.
7. Sierra, 10.
8. Luis Alegres, "Sedena Studies Top Post Contenders," *Reforma*, 24 September 2000, as translated in FBIS LAP2000925000077.
9. Statements by Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, "Adviser's Upbeat View of Defense Chief," *El Universal*, 14 December 2000, as translated in FBIS LAP200012-15000086.
10. "Mexican Army to Maintain Anti-Drug Role," *El Universal*, 9 August 2000, as translated in FBIS LAP20000809000076.
11. "Armed Forces Anti-Narcotics Role Termed 'Positive,'" *El Universal*, 10 August 2000, as translated in FBIS LAP20000810000069.
12. Gustavo Castillo Garcia, "La Armada, sin equipo para integrarse a una fuerza de paz: Peyrot," *La Jornada*, 7 January 2001.
13. *Reforma*, 8 January 2001, as translated in FBIS LAP20010108000069.
14. Ibid.
15. See, for example, Ricardo Ravelo, "Militares en tareas de seguridad y justicia: de fracaso en fracaso," *Proceso*, 10 December 2000.
16. David Vicenteño, "Propone Fox crear Sectetaría de Seguridad Pública," *Reforma*, 8 March 2000. Fox had proposed the organization before the election. Both Fox and former president Zedillo evidently worked on details of the structure before Fox took office.
17. Rubén Torres, "Nace la Secretaría de Seguridad Pública," *La Economista*, 15 January 2001.
18. For a discussion of the Federal Preventative Police (PFP), see Graham H. Turbiville Jr, "Mexico's Multimission Force for Internal Security," *Military Review*, July-August 2000, 41-49.
19. Torres.
20. Zinser.

21. For a discussion of Mexican armed groups, see Turbiville, "Mexico's Multimission Force," *Military Review*, July-August 1999, 41; Turbiville, "Mexico's Other Insurgents," *Military Review*, May-June 1997, 81-89.
22. Daniel Moreno, "Anuncia Fox amnistía para el EPR," *Reforma*, 2 December 2000.
23. "ERPI Calls for Building of `People's Power,'" *Reforma*, 17 August 2000, as translated in FBIS LAP20000817000082.
24. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Congressional Testimony by Thomas A. Constantine, Administrator, DEA, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics and Terrorism, "International Organized Crime Syndicates and Their Impact on the United States," 26 February 1998.
25. José Galá, "Roto, el vínculo entre el *cártel* de los Arellano Félix y las FARC: PGR," *La Jornada*, 24 November 2000.
26. José Luis Ruiz, "Fox Announces Plan to Stop Arellano Felix Cartel," *El Universal*, 22 December 2000, as translated in FBIS LAP20001222000041.
27. Ibid.

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*Proceso*

Photo from Mexican television  
Rodolfo Zepeda, *Proceso*